

# Information on Chickenpox

## (*Varicella Zoster*)



### What is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a common, highly contagious, rash illness caused by the *varicella zoster* virus. Though generally a mild illness in children, chickenpox can cause more serious illness and medical complications in susceptible adults, pregnant women and immune compromised persons.

### Who can get Chickenpox?

Anyone at any age. In most cases, once a person has had varicella infection they are immune.

### How is Chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is one of the most easily transmitted viral infections. The virus can be transmitted in three ways:

1. through the air when a person with chickenpox coughs or sneezes
2. by direct contact with blisters, sores or their discharges
3. a person who has not had chickenpox can become infected through direct contact with the sores caused by herpes zoster (shingles)

### What are the symptoms of Chickenpox?

Symptoms usually appear 14 to 17 days after infection. Chickenpox is characterized by an itchy rash and mild fever (usually less than 101 degrees). The skin rash begins as red bumps on the scalp, chest, back, underarms, neck, and face. The bumps change into blisters and finally form scabs.

### When is someone contagious?

As many as 5 days **before** (usually 1 to 2 days) the rash appears to 5 days **after** the first crop of vesicles or rash appeared.

### How long should my child stay home from school or day care?

For 5 days from the time the rash first appeared.

### Is there a treatment for chickenpox?

The symptoms of chickenpox can be treated to make a person more comfortable.

Soak in a lukewarm bath one or more times a day. Add 1 tablespoon of baking soda to the bath.

Acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol) may be used to reduce fever. **Never give a child aspirin to reduce a fever!**

- Diphenhydramine (e.g. Benadryl), an antihistamine, may be given to reduce itching. Be sure to follow the manufacturer's recommendations. Use only as directed.
- Keep children's fingernails short to prevent scratching. If an infection occurs as a result of scratching consult your doctor.
- Topical skin creams (e.g. calamine lotion) may help reduce itching and scratching.

### How can the spread of chickenpox be prevented?

Exclude an infected person from school or day care for 5 days after the rash appears.

Cover the mouth and nose with tissue when sneezing or coughing. Dispose of tissue promptly.

**Practice good hand washing!** The virus is spread by direct contact with the fluid in blisters, as

well as secretions from the nose and mouth. Avoid exposing pregnant women, newborns, the elderly, or immune compromised persons.

### **What if I'm pregnant?**

A newborn is at risk for serious varicella infection when the mother develops chickenpox from 5 days before delivery to two days afterward. **If you are exposed to chickenpox during your pregnancy, contact your doctor immediately.**

### **Is there a vaccine to prevent chickenpox?**

- In 1995 a varicella vaccine was approved for use in the United States for persons over 12 months of age.
- Children who lack a reliable history of chickenpox should receive one dose of varicella vaccine between 12 and 18 months of age.
- Susceptible children between 19 months of age and their 13th birthday should receive one dose of varicella vaccine.
- Susceptible adolescents and adults *13 years of age and older* should be immunized with 2 doses of vaccine administered 4 to 8 weeks apart.

### **What is Shingles?**

Shingles (*herpes zoster*) is a *reactivation* of earlier varicella infection. Shingles is characterized by lesions that often appear in a band along one to three nerve pathways on the upper body. Shingles is often accompanied by localized pain. The lesions heal within a few days but the pain may persist for weeks. Persons with shingles should consult their physician.

### **Is Shingles contagious?**

Shingles lesions contain the varicella virus. A person who has not had chickenpox or has not been vaccinated against varicella zoster can become infected by direct contact with the lesions.

***For more information contact your doctor or local health department.***

### **Central District Health Department**

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